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# Majma' an-Nurayn: Fāṭimah in the Esoteric Shī'ite Tradition

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## Introduction

One of the most little discussed subjects in academic research on Shī'ism is the esoteric and mystical position assigned Fāṭimah bint Muḥammad, the daughter of the Prophet. It is not surprising that she should be assigned a status of enormous stature within the Shī'ite religion, being known as the *majma' an-nurayn*, the "meeting points of the two lights."[1] For Shī'ites she is the daughter of the Seal of the Prophets, the wife of the Seal of the Imāms, and the mother of the remaining Imāms. She is described by many titles, the most famous being "mistress of the women of the world" (*sayyidah nisā' al-'alāmīn*), as well as the radiant one (*az-zahrā'*). She is connected to all of the infallibles in Shī'ite Islam, and she is usually cast as the only female member of the Infallible family of the Prophet. Her status in both the Twelver and Ismā'īlī traditions will be the subject of this paper.

The role of the "esoteric feminine" has formed a critical part of Sufism,[2] especially that of Rūmī and Ibn 'Arabī, though it is largely ignored within the mainstream, juristically influenced forms of Twelver Shī'ism that dominate the Twelver

[1] Amir-Moezzi *Divine Guide* 25.
[2] See, for example, Corbin *Alone* 157-175.

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world today. Since the advent of Khumayni, the emphasis in Twelver Shi'ism has been on women's political and revolutionary role, a kind of anti-feminism where the value of the woman is seen to be that of a soldier and warrior, rather then as a symbol of the esoteric feminien.[3] While there have been cults of Mary within the Christian world, there was never a same degree of adoration accorded to Fāṭimah, in spite of the position she is assigned to in esoteric religion. Within the early *ḥadīth*s, and within the Ismā'īlī mystical tradition, we find her assigned a profound a role: that above and beyond the mascule Imāms there is a super-femine aspect of the Divine, which combines both the attributes of Divine Beauty and Divine Glory while transcendign them both. This is manifest in the form of Fāṭimah, who represents a kind of Infinite Paradox: she represents precisely that which is unmanifestable of the Supreme Godhead. In some *ḥadīth*s, the position of Fāṭimah is seemingly even *higher* than that given to the Imāms.

Traditionally, Shī'ahs have understood the "proofs of Allāh" to be the Prophet and the Twelve Imāms who follow after him. It is the Imāms who are entitled to both temporal and political rule, and it is they who explicate and preserve the law and doctrine of Islam. But one of the most important themes in Shī'ism is that of the *Fourteen* Infallibles, which includes the Prophet's daughter Fāṭimah. But one may be tempted to ask: since she is not an Imām, what role does her infallibility serve? The answer to that is to be found in the mystical traditions of Shī'ite Islām.

## The Imām and Fāṭimah

[3] Such as the women's "Zaynab Commandos" of the Iranian revolution. See Reeves 22-23, 126-128.

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The greatest emphasis in the Shī'ite mystical literature is, of course, on the figure of the Imām himself. The Imām is considered to be the Face of God, His Supreme Manifestation in Creation. Shī'ism has always adopted a theology that is profoundly apophatic, especially in its more mystical varities. God is viewed as being beyond all names, all attributes, all description, and it is only through the Imām that God is able to be known. The apophatic theology is referred to in a number of *ḥadīth*s, such as the first sermon of *Nahj al-Balāgah* of Imām 'Alī:

> The best in religion is knowledge of Him, and the perfection of knowing Him is to acknowledge Him in truth, and the perfection of acknowledgment in Truth is His Oneness (*tawḥīd*), and the perfection of His Oneness is purity towards Him, and the perfection of Purity towards Him is to deny Him attributes. This, because every attribute bears witness to the fact that every description is other than what is described, and everything described bears witness that it is other than what describes it. Who ever describes Allāh, May He be Glorified, has attached to Him, and who ever attaches to Him has doubled Him, and whoever has doubled Him has divided him, and whoever has divided Him is ignorant of Him.[4]

In the Ismā'īlī tradition, the *Book of the Well-Springs* by Abū Ya'qūb as-Sijistānī opens with the following supplication:

> Praise to Allāh, whose praises are not reached by any who speak, and whose blessings are counted by any who count. The strivers will not satisfy His Right, none will reach Him even after the greatest effort, and no matter how deep the wise may dive, they will never reach Him. His Attribute any limit or limitation,

[4] *Nahj al-Balāgah* Sermon 1.

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no Name for Him exists, no Time for Him may be reckoned, and He has no End that may be appointed. He has created the creations with his power.[5]

Philosophically, the Ismā'īlī authors eventually came to argue that God transcends all limitations, including the mental categories of existence and non-existence. He was said to not exist, and to not not-exist, in a process of perpetual, infinite negation. Al-Kirmānī writes:

One group (*ba'ḍ*) of existing things (*al-mawjūdāt*) derive (*yastanad*) their existence from another group. If that other group of existing things from which this [first] group derives its existence from and from which its existence is contingent upon were not confirmed in existence, if it did not exist, then this [derived] group [of existing things] could not exist. Now, insofar as it is proven that that this group of existing things cannot have existence without this second group of existing things, then it is known that the Being to which all things derive their existence from God – there is no God but He, and that God is He who makes them existence. If God was a non-existent (*lays*), then the existing things (*al-mawjūdat*) must also be non-existent. But since the existing things exist (*mawjūdah*), therefore the supposition of its non-existence is invalid (Al-Kirmani 130).

Yet at the same time, the believer realizes that there is more than God as Pure Being. There is that which is beyond both Being and non-Being, beyond all duality. For existence has its opposite, non-existence, and although it is infinite, it is qualified by its own infinity. Its border is Pure Non-Being. What lies beyond God is referred to in theology as the *Godhead*, or alternatively the Divine Essence. The Divine Essence is

[5] Walker 39.

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pre-ontological insofar as it is the source of Being but is beyond Being and non-Being itself. Al-Kirmani explains:

> Based on what we discussed previously, we see that insofar as an existent (*ays*) in its being an existent is needy (*muhtaj*) towards that which it derives its existence from. And we know that He – Glorified be His Greatness – is Exalted above any need in what He is (*fī ma huwa huwa*) towards another, in a way that what He is becomes dependent on that. As such, this necessitates the judgment (*hukm*) that He – the Exalted – is outside [of any possibility] of being an existent, as an existent *qua* existent requires that which originates it and makes it existent… Based on what we discussed previously, we see that insofar as an existent (*ays*) in its being an existent is needy (*muhtaj*) towards that which it derives its existence from. And we know that He – Glorified be His Greatness – is Exalted above any need in what He is (*fī ma huwa huwa*) towards another, in a way that what He is becomes dependent on that. As such, this necessitates the judgment (*hukm*) that He – the Exalted – is outside [of any possibility] of being an existent, as an existent *qua* existent requires that which originates it and makes it existent.[6]

The Imām is the answer to the paradox of apophatic theology. If all that can be said about God is what he is *not*, then all that can be said about the Imām is what he *is*, and he is the supreme manifestation of Divinity within the world. This is referred to in a number of *ḥadīth*s:

> Imām aṣ-Ṣādiq said: Indeed, Allāh created us and formed us, and gave us the most perfect form. He made us His Eye over His Servants, and His Speaking Tongue, through which He speaks to His Servants. We are His Open Hand, extended with Mercy and Kindness to His Servants. We are His Face, through which He is reached, and the Gate which indicates upon Him. We are His reservoir in the heavens and Earth. Through us, the trees grow and the fruits are ripened. Through us the rivers flow, and through us the

[6] Al-Kirmānī 131.

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succor of the skies comes down. We plant the grasses of the Earth. Through the worship of us, Allāh is worshipped. If it were not for us, Allāh would not be worshipped.[7]

Asuad ibn Sa'id said: "I was with Abū Ja'far [al-Bāqir], and he said to me without any question on my part: 'We are the proofs of Allāh. We are the Gate of Allāh. We are the tongue of Allāh. We are the Face of Allāh. We are the Eye of Allāh in His Creation. We are the holders of His Command over his servants."[8]

Hąshim ibn Abī 'Umayr said: "I heard the Prince of Believers say: 'I am the Eye of Allāh. I am the Hand of Allāh. I am the side of Allāh. I am the Gate of Allāh.'"[9]

'Abdallāh ibn Abī Ya'fūr said: "Abū 'Abdillāh [aṣ-Ṣādiq] said to me: 'O Ibn Abī Ya'fur! Indeed Allāh the Blessed and Exalted is One, absolutely One in Oneness. He is singular in His Command. He Created the Creation, and He has made them unique before this Command. And indeed we are those beings, O Ibn Abī Ya'Fur! We are the Proofs of Allāh over His Servants and His Witnesses in His Creation. We are the storehouse of His Knowledge, and we are those who call to His Path. Whoever obeys us, has obeyed Allāh."[10]

'Alī As-Sā'iłī said: 'I asked Abū al-Ḥasan Ar-Riḍā about the words of Allāh: "Lest the soul would say! Woe upon me for what I neglected at the side of Allāh. Indeed, I am amongst the lost."[11]. He said: "The side of Allāh is the Prince of Believers, and so are those who follow him from the inheritors."[12]

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[7] *al-Kāfī* 1:144.
[8] *Baṣā'ir* 62; *al-Kāfī* 144.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] 39:56.
[12] *Baṣā'ir* Ibid.

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Imām al-Bāqir said: "We are the face of Allāh, continually passing through your midst. We are the Eye of Allāh in His Creation, and His Open Hand, extended with Mercy to His Servants. He who knows us, knows us; and he who is ignorant of us, is ignorant of us."[13]

'Alī said: "I am the guide and the guided. I am the father of the orphans, and the husband of the widows and the paupers. I am the shelter of every weak one, and the place of safety for all who fear. I am the one who leads the believers to paradise. I am the first rope of Allāh. I am the firm handhold of Allāh. I am the Eye of Allāh, and His Truthful Tongue. I am His Hand, and His Side, of which a soul will say: 'Woe upon me for what I neglected at the side of Allāh." I am the Hand of Allāh, extended to His Servants with Mercy and Forgiveness. I am the gate of humility. He who knows me, and knows my Right, then *he knows his Lord*, because I am the inheritor of His Prophet, His Proof over Creation. No one rejects me, except that he rejects Allāh and His Prophet.[14]

In the Ismā'īlī tradition, the Imām represents somewhat more then this. The key role of the Imām is even greater. He is the master of the esoteric interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of the Qur'ān, the oen who brings out its secret meanings (*bāṭin*). While the Prophet comes to establish the religious Law and the Book that serves as its basis, the Imām comes to deconstruct the text and bring out its "inner meaning." This is referred to in the *Kitāb al-Kashf*, an early esoteric work of the Ismā'īlī tradition of Ja'far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman (d. 990).

…whoever connects with the Imām who is the Master of the Esoteric will be safe when the Speaking-Messenger manifests himself, and will not be subject to his sword or his vengeance. This is because the Silent Imām is the house of houses and the *telos* of definition, and so whoever enters him and takes the

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[13] *al-Kāfī* 1:143.
[14] *al-Ikhtiṣāṣ* 248.

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covenant of allegiance with him is safe. He is the Prince of Believers, and the Veil, and the Proof, peace be upon him. Whoever receives knowledge from him is blessed, and whoever holds fast to his rope of Allāh and the Imāms of His Religion will not be broken from them. The Silent Imām is the master of the esoteric, and does not speak of the exoteric Law, He is the Imām of the Law of the Speaking-Messenger who came before him, and he does not speak of a new Law, and so therefore he is called the Silent Imām in order to distinguish him from the Speaking Imām (*al-imām an-nāṭiq*).[15]

The union of the esoteric and exoteric is described as being like a marriage, a union between two aspects of the Divine religion:

Allāh's words "Allāh fixes those who believe with a fixed word in the worldly life," then this is like a spiritual marriage of those who unite the esoteric (*ta'wīl*) with the exoteric revelation (*tanzīl*) in the hereafter.[16]

The union of the two is also referred to in the medieval text of the *da'ī* Ḥamīd ad-Dīn al-Kirmanī (d. 1020), who writes commenting on the Qur'anic verse:

Then Allāh says: "From the cattle, there are some that are beasts of burden, and others meant for eating." This means that there is an earthly spiritual hierarchy that is designed to carry the heavy burdens in seeking the truth in the religion of Allāh, and so they seek the spiritual instruction and guidance from the well spring of blessings in the oneness of Allāh, and are certain in their worship of Allāh, both exoterically and esoterically, just as a camel carries heavy burdens on a journey. It is like the Imam, who is given Divine support (*ta'yid*) from heaven, who uses the spiritual hierarchy to explain the symbols of the

[15] Ja'far ibn Manṣūr 98.
[16] Ja'far ibn Manṣūr 36.

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religion, being like a blanket and covering to them, as is done with the hides of many animals and with their wool. They are like the Proofs and the Missionaries.[17]

The Imam represents the untiy of the esoteric and the exoteric for a scholar like Al-Kirmānī, but as we have seen from Ja'far, his "specialty" is manifesting the estoeric aspect of the religion. If he represents the esoteric, then the mystical traditions of both the Twelvers and the Ismā'īlīs would seem to posit her as the *esoteric of the esoteric*. She is not discussed to anywhere near the same degree as the Prophet and Imāms are in the the literature of these two traditions, but when she is described, she is described in the heighest terms. It seems quite apparent that her noble attributes are mostly indescribable, and hence there is a veil of silence that hangs over her, a veil that is rarely pierced. The *ḥadīth* below is quoted in the *Tafsīr Atyab al-Bayān*, where the Twelver Imām Ḥasan al-'Askari says:

We are the proofs of Allāh upon Creation. But our grandmother, Fāṭimah, *is the proof of Allāh over us*.[18]

The Imām has certainly upset the balance here. The Imām is seen to be the way that God is known, but the question is then raised: how does God become manifest to the one who manifests Him? The simple answer to the question would be that they know God through their ownselves, but that is not the case. Rather, it is through the one feminine member of the spritual hierarchy that God becomes manifest to them. They are the proofs of Allāh over creation, and Fāṭimah is the proof over them. She therefore lies

[17] Al-Kirmāni 237-238.
[18] Qtd. in al-Mas'ūdī 69.

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beyond all knowledge and understanding, and so what we see is an apophatic theology applied to *her*, not just to God. This is brought out most in a narration from the ancient *Umm al-Kitāb*, a source of esoteric teachings in the Ismā'īlī tradition, concerning the childhood transfiguration of Imam al-Baqir when he was sitting with his teacher, Abdallāh Ṣabbāḥ (not to be confused with the famous "extremist" Abdallāh ibn Sabā'):

The master (Abdallah Sabbah) ceases to see the little Imam and instead sees the Prophet transfigured, his face hallowed in tresses of light: "I am the pure Lord, transcending all attribute and all description." Successively, he sees Alī, then Fāṭimah. Dressed in silk and gold brocade, a green veil on her hair, Fāṭimah declares: "There is no God beside me, neither in divinity nor humanity, neither in the Heavens nor on earth, outside of me, who am Fāṭimah the Creator, it is I who created the spirit of the True Believers." (Qtd. in Corbin *Cyclical Time* 146).

Henry Corbin explains it beautifully when he writes:

She is called *Fātimah-Baṭūl*, that is to say, the Vrigin Fatimah; on the plane of theophanic vision, she is really the mother of the divinity (*lāhūt*) of the two young Imams [Ḥasan and Ḥusayn]; she has the power to bear them to the Imāmah…[this is] because the fruit of Paradise from which Fāṭimah was born signifies the reunion of the two functions of Imamah [*istiqrār* and *istida*', the Permanent Imam and the Trustee Imam; Imam Ḥusayn was the former and Imam Ḥasan was the latter]. In the person of Fātimah the two functions of the Imamah are combined, but they separate once more in her sons, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. The two little Imams were not born of her has other children of men are born, or rather they were the children of Fāṭimah in the physical sense *and* in the most concrete spiritual sense. Hasan issued from her *left side* because he *is* the *istida'* and also the exoteric law to which the *ta'wil* must apply. Husayn issued from her *right side* because he is the *istiqrār* and the esoteric *ta'wīl*, the essential sense (*haqīqah*). In this sense (and

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not by virtue of a physiological process), Fatimah is the mother of the divinity of the Imams (their *lāhūt* [Divinity]), for she herself possesses a Temple of Light, she is a repository of *lāhūt*[19]

Her existence is seen to be the source of the existence of the Prophet and the Imāms themselves. She is both their proximate cause and their terminal cause, for it is only for the sake of *her* that they come into existence. We read:

O Muḥammad! If it were not for you, I would not have created the stars. And if it were not for ʻAlī, I would not have created you. And if it were not for Fāṭimah, I would not have created either of you.[20]

Another narration plays upon a similar theme:

The Prophethood of any Prophet is not complete until he commits himself to her bounty and to the love of her; indeed, she is the most truthful one.[21]

Jurists have attempted to explain these narrations away in a patriarchal way. An example is the argument of *al-Asrār al-Fāṭimiyyah* of Muḥammad Fāḍil Mas'ūdī. The argument is that the universe exists for the sake of worshipping Allāh, and that it is only through the Prophet that this occurs. However, it is only through the Imām that the Prophet's message is preserved, and so therefore there is no point in sending the Prophet if there is nobody to preserve his message. But ʻAlī was destined to die as well, and so there needed to be more Imāms, and so there had to be Fāṭimah in order that more

[19]Corbin *Cyclical Time* 108.

[20] Qtd. in al-Mas'ūdi 231.
[21] Qtd. in Ibid. 147.

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Imāms could be produced.[22] This argument is certainly as patriarchal as it can get, because it seems to assume that her only role in the universe is to produce children, and not to be a source of spirituality or enlightenment herself. It is also legalistic, insofar as it in hinges on the need for a "proof" that establishes the religious Law, rather then need of a *figure* who manifests the highest aspect of Divinity. Yet the *ḥadīth* of Ḥasan al-'Askarī cited before would posit her as being far more then just a breeder of Imāms; she is the way that the Imāms *themselves* come to know their Creator.

Furthermore, the Prophethood of all prophets is seen in this narration to hinge on accepting and acknowledging her. Being a condition of their Prophethood, she is like a mistress over them, just as accepting the Imām is considered to be an obligation upon the believers for themt o become believers. This puts her in a position that is higher and more noble then that of the Prophet, rather then just being merely his daughter who is there to continue his off-spring.

## The Radiant One

Another set of *ḥadīths* approach the issue of Fatima's transcendence from the standpoint of her well-known appellation, "the Radiant" (*Zahrā*). The idea presented here is, rather than a kind of dark Unknowability (which would seem to be properly applied to God as such (cf. the idea of the "black Light" of the Divine Essence described by Corbin in his *Man of Light*[23]), is the idea of a blinding light, too luminous to be perceived. This Light, it should be noted, is not just a physical phenomena. It is

[22] Ibid 231-242.
[23] Corbin *Man of Light* 100.

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something that is also seen to be perceptible to the physical senses. These narrations form a large bulk of the Twelver literature concerning her "luminous status":

Amarah said: "I asked Aba 'Abdillāh about Fāṭimah, and why she was referred to as "the Radiant." He said: "When she would stand to pray in her *miḥrāb* [alcove], her Light would radiate to the people of heaven, just as the light of the stars radiates to the people of the Earth."[24]

Abān ibn Tagalub asked Imām aṣ-Ṣādiq: "Why is the Radiant one referred to as such?" He said: "Because there were three instances where, during the day, she became radiant with Light before the Prince of Believers ['Alī]. The light of her face became radiant during the morning prayer. The people were asleep, and the *whiteness* of this Light penetrated into their homes in Madīnah, turning their walls to white. They were shocked by this, and so they went to the Prophet and asked him about what they saw. And so he sent them to the house of Fāṭimah where they saw her fixed in her *miḥrāb*, praying. The Light radiated from her *miḥrāb* as well as her face. And so they learned that, what they had seen, was from the Light of the face of Fāṭimah.

"Later on, at noon-time, and she was preparing for the prayer, her face radiated a *yellow* light, and the Light penetrated the homes of the people, turning their clothes and their own selves to yellow. And so they went to the Prophet and asked about what they had seen, and so he sent them to the house of Fāṭimah. And they saw her in her *miḥrāb*, and her face was radiant with yellow light. And so they learned that, what they had seen, was the light of the face of Fāṭimah.

"When the day ended, and the sun had set, the face of Fāṭimah radiated *red*, out of joy and thanks to Allāh the Glorified and Exalted. The Light entered the homes of the people and turned their walls red, and they were stunned by this. And so they went to the home of the Prophet to ask him about what they had seen, and so he sent them to the house of Fāṭimah. And they saw her sitting in her *miḥrāb*, glorifying and praising Allāh, and her face was radiant with red light. And so they learned that what they had seen, was from the Light of the face of Fāṭimah. This Light did not pass from her until the birth of Imām al-

[24] Ibid. 215.

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Ḥusayn, and this Light radiates from color to color in our faces until the Day of Rising, passing from Imām to Imām."[25]

She is therefore both physically and spiritually luminous. Her physical form, veiled under a *hijāb*, is said to be so radiant that it is almost blinding, filling the city of the Prophet with light. The symbolism of Madīnah, the city of the Prophet, is telling here, for in a famous *ḥadīth* the Prophet describes himself as being the "city of knowledge," with ʻAlī as its gate. Her light fills the city of knowledge whenever she goes to pray.

Furthermore, the *ḥadīth* also goes on to say that the Light of the Imāms is present *within* her, and does not cease to "pass" from her until it goes from Imām to Imām. The Imām is seen as the repository of Divine Light, and she is the repository of the repository. Once again, her superiority over the Imāms is hinted at in these *ḥadīth*s.

She represents not a passive feminintiy, but a profound luminosity that is said to come from the Glory of God, an aspect of Him that is usually considered "masculine" in nature. The following *ḥadīth* is narrated by the mystic Jābir ibn Yazīd al-Juʻfī:

I said to Abū ʻAbdillāh [aṣ-Ṣādiq]: "Why is Fāṭimah the Radiant named the Radiant?" The Imām replied: Because Allāh the Mighty and Glorified created her from the Light of His Glory. When she radiated (*ishraqat*), she illuminated the heavens and the Earth with her light. The vision of the angels were *overwhelmed*, and they collapsed before Allāh in prostration. They said: "Our God and Master, what is this Light?" And so Allāh revealed to them: "This Light is from my Light, and I bring it to repose in my Heavens. I created it from my Glory, and will draw it out from the greatest Prophet of my prophets. From

[25] Ibid.

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this, I will draw forth the Light of the Imāms who will rise with my command, who will guide to my Truth, and whom I will make my representative to the Earth once my revelation is complete.[26]

She is also said to be in posession of a special manuscript that contains knowledge not given to the Imāms. This book is entitled the *Mashaf al-Fāṭimah*, the "manuscript of Fāṭimah". Abū Baṣīr narrates that he asked Imām aṣ-Ṣādiq about it, to which he said:

It is a manuscript, three times of the length of your Qur'ān. And yet not a single letter is in it from your Qur'ān.[27]

The fact that the term "your Qur'ān" is being used is probably indicative of an early Shī'ite belief in *taḥrīf* in the Qur'ān, and that they and they alone are in possession of the true Qur'ān. The Imāms describe the text as being one that portends all future events. One of Imām aṣ-Ṣādiq's companions, Fudail ibn Sakrah, came to him once, and the Imām is narrated to have said:

"O Fudail! Do you know what I was looking at before?" Fudail said no. The Imām continued: "I was looking into the Book of Fāṭimah. Indeed, there is no king who will ever take possession [of the Earth] except that his name and his father's name are written in it".[28]

Ḥammād ibn 'Uthmān narrates:

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[26] Aṣ-Ṣadūq *'Ilal* 1:213-214.
[27] *al-Kāfī* 1:239.
[28] Ibid. 1:242.

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I heard Abū ʻAbdillāh [aṣ-Ṣādiq] saying: "The atheists will become manifest in the year 128, and this I have seen written in the manuscript of Fāṭimah". Hamad asked: "And what is the manuscript of Fāṭimah?" The Imām said: "Indeed, when Allāh took his Prophet, Fāṭimah was overtaken by the most intense grief at his death, so intense that only Allāh the Exalted and Glorified can reckon it. And so Allāh sent an angel to her, who consoled her and spoke to her. She went in fear to the Prince of Believers, who said: 'I sensed something of this and heard the voice. Tell me everything that he said". And so she *taught* him everything that was said, and the Prince of Believers wrote everything down that he heard, until he completed a manuscript". The Imām then said: "There is nothing in it concerning the *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*; what is in it is the knowledge of all that is and all that will be".[29]

What is fascianting about this particular *ḥadīth* is that Fāṭimah, in a rare moment, is seen to be teaching the Imām herself, rather then being taught by her. The angel descends to her, just as an angel descends to the Prophet, and she is given a special revelation and a special dispensation that allows her to witness things about the world, its past, present, and future that is not given to any other. Furthermore, this knowledge is *not* given to the Imām, but is left to Fāṭmah and Ḟātimah alone. When the Imām desires to possess this knowledge, he has to go to *her*. Once again, we see echoes of the *ḥadīth* of Ḥasan al-ʻAskarī, described above.

Interestingly enough, she is not associated with any Sophia like figure. There is not really an analogy to Sophia as a bride of God or as an archetype of Divine wisdom in Islām. What we have instead is a feminine figure who is seen, above all else, as a creatrix and a manifestation of the Divine to the remaining members of the spiritual hierarchy.

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[29] Ibid. 1:240.

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## The Night of Power

Indeed, we revealed it in the Night of Power. And how could you reckon what the Night of Power is? The Night of Power is better than a thousand nights. The angels and the Spirit descend within it by the permission of their Lord, and they come with every command. Peace! Until the break of dawn.[30]

The esoteric interpretation (*ta´wīl*) of this verse, as given in many *ḥadīths*, is that it refers to Fāṭimah. There are many facets to this commentary, but the most important aspect is how it relates to the lines: "And how could you comprehend the Night of Power?" The idea that the Night of Power (the night in which the Qur'ān was first revealed) is beyond the grasp of human beings seems to be the implication of the rhetorical language used here. With regards to Fāṭimah, the same Unknowability prevails. This is referred to in another *ḥadīth*, which uses similar language as one cited above, but with the added connection to the Night of Power:

He who truly understands the Night of Power, then he has truly understood Fāṭimah. Yet she is named Fāṭimah because the creation has been weaned (*fuṭima*) from having any knowledge of her.[31]

The implication in this narration is clear: both the Night of Power and Fāṭimah are ultimately unknowable in their true reality. There seems, then, to be an alternation between two themes related to the praise of Fāṭimah in the *ḥadīth* literature: one is the idea of darkness, which seems to be symbolized by the Night of Power. The other is the

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[30] 97:1-5.
[31] Cf. Al-Mas'ūdī 369-375.

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idea of Light, a Light that is too bright to ever be truly perceived. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the Imāms and early Imāmī Shī'ites preferred the title Fāṭimah the Radiant, since this title seems to balance two facets of their teachings concerning her.

The Night of Power is, of course, the Night in which the Qur'ān was believed to be revealed. Within the Shī'ite mystical tradition, the Qur'ān is considered of two types: the Speaking Qur'ān (*al-qur'ān an-nāṭiq*) and the Silent Qur'ān (*al-qur'ān aṣ-ṣāmit*). The Silent Qur'ān is the actual, revealed text. It is silent insofar as it needs an interpretor, and needs somebody to give it life. This is the Speaking Qur'ān, who for the Shī'ites is the Imām of the age. The text of the Qur'ān is like the matter from which me makes a scultpture.

She is the Night of Power because the Night of Power, exoterically, is when the entirety of the Holy Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet. The Holy Qur'an is the Silent Qur'an, whereas the Imam is the speaking Qur'an. Because she is the *majma' an-nurayn*, the entirety of Imamah becomes manifest in her, from her husband the *asas* to all the Imams from her progeny. Therefore, she is the manifestation of both the Silent and Speaking Qur'ān, and its repository. She is better then a thousand months, which is referred to in the *ta'wīl* tradition as a metaphor to the reign of the Umayyads, who were the enemies of the Prophet's family and who were responsible for the murder of Imam Husayn. The angels descend within her; the angels refers to the *ḥudūd*, the members of the esoteric hierarchy who represent the Imam in every age. The Holy Spirit is what connects the physical manifestation of the Imam to his body of light. The break of dawn refers to the coming of the final Mahdī, who will end the cycle of closure that we live in

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and usher in the cycle of unveiling, where all the esoteric secrets of the universe will be revealed. Corbin writes of this:

The Night of Destiny is the Prophet's daughter, mother of the holy Imāms….Fāṭimah was the *ḥujjah* [Proof] of the Prophet's *waṣī* [Inheritor], the foundation and principle of the Imamate. Therefore it is true that on this Night, in he r person, the Angels and the Spirit – that is to say the entire line of Imams issuing from her and typifying on earth the angelic ministry – descend to earth. This why it is true to say that "peace accompanies this Night until the dawn," meaning until the Manifestation of the *Qā'im* [the Resurrector, the Imām who will come at the end of time and bring the Kingdom of God to Earth] and the dawning of the new Cycle of Unveiling.

## The Ismā'īli Tradition

The Ismā'īlī tradition, as discussed, lays great emphasis on *ta'wīl*, the esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān. One of the salient components of Ismā'īlī *ta'wil* is that Qur'ānid verses are almost always taken as referring back to individuals, either the Prophet or his families, or their historical enemeis who Shī'ites believe usurped their position. Much of the time the esoteric interprettation revolves around 'Alī, but Fāṭimah appears in a number of esoteric interpretations, such as the following interpretation of the verse of Light in the Qur'an, which reads:

Allāh is the light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His light is a niche in which there is a lamp. The lamp is in a Glass, the Glass, like a glistening star, kindled from a blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil well nigh glows though no fire has touched it: light upon light. God

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guides to His light whom He wills, and God strikes parables for human beings, and God knows all things.[32]

Ja'far ibn Manṣūr (d. 990) writes of her, commenting on this verse:

The niche is Fāṭimah, and the lamp is Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn is the glass, and Fāṭimah is the radiant star of the women of the universe. The blessed tree is Abraham, the verse "neither east nor west" means that he was neither Jewish nor Christian, the verse "its oil is luminous, almost lighting" means that knowledge almost speaks from it. The verse "Allah guides to His Light whom He wills" means that Allah will guide to our *walāyah* whomever He wills.[33]

She is said to represent the clear, pure glass in which the two primary types of Imāms (the permanent Imām, the Imām *mustaqarr*, represented by Imām Ḥusayn, and the trustee Imām or *pīr*, represented by Imām Ḥasan) are contained. This is similar to the Night of Power interpretation given above. The Night of Power is the night where the Qur'ān is revealed, and so it is a container for the "Qur'ān." Similarly, Fāṭimah is the container for both the Speaking and the Silent Qur'ān, being the daughter of the one who the Silent Qur'ān was revealed to, and wife and mother to all of the Speaking Qur'āns.

She is not just seen as a repository, though, but also as a creator, a manifestation of the purely creative aspect of the Divine. For this reason her name is often linked with the attribute of Allāh *Al-Fāṭir*, "the Creator" or "the Former":

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[32] 24:35.
[33] Ja'far ibn Manṣūr 25.

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Indeed, Allah created veils from the Light of His Face, and gave each one a name from His Names. He is the Praise, and so he named his Prophet after this [Muhammad meaning "the most praised"]. And He is Ali, and so He named the Prince of Believers Ali. And to Him is the most beautiful names, and so he named Hasan and Husayn after this [Hasan meaning beautiful and Husayn the next most beautiful, Husayn being less beautiful and *jamali* because he was the *jalali* Imam], and He is the Creator (*fatir*) of the heavens and the Earth, and so he derive from it the name of Fatimah.[34]

This creative aspect is emphasized in another passage from the same text, where she is said to be a Proof (*ḥujjah*) of the Imām, leading towards him and indicating upon him. Furthermore, she is described as being the source of everything that exists in the heavens and the Earth. Far more than just being the physical mother of the Imāms, she is posited as being the mother of creation itself:

The Proof connects to the Glorious Well, which is the Imām, and the Proof is the Great Mary[35] – her peace be upon us - who casts forth all things and shapes them, and lays their foundation and creates them. The meaning of this is that she opens up the gates of knowledge after they were closed and completes the attributes of faith and of the believer by guiding whoever followers her to the Master of Truth, who was Jesus – peace be upon him. She indicated towards him before anybody else did, and turned the people towards a new Law from the religion of Allāh and to a new Speaking Messenger. This is the "new creation" in the esoteric meaning, and it is the Great Fāṭimah in the time of the sixth Adam, who is Muḥammad. She is the great *fā'*, and the veil is established for the people who are intimate with knowledge and seek intimacy with his Spirit. And so when Allāh breathed into him of His Spirit, he became a new, fresh entity that never changes.

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[34] Ja'far ibn Manṣūr 52.
[35] A common title for Fāṭimah.

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Here, we see Mary (who is taken as a metaphor for Fāṭimah throughout these texts) is seen as the *initiator* of Jesus. She is not merely his miraculous, Virgin Mother, but she is also the one who "opens up the gates" of knowledge and makes him into a new creation. The power of the esoteric feminine here lies not only in its ability to create, but also in its ability to *recreate* a spiritualized man anew.

It should be clear here that there are really two types of femininity being discussed within the context of Islamic mysticism. There is firstly the archetype of a passive femininity, that is usually considered subordinate to the man. But here we see an archetype of a different kind of femininity that is above the masculine element. Within Islamic theology and mysticism, God's attributes are usually divided into two types: *jamālī* attributes (attributes of beauty) and *jalālī* attributes (attributes of glory). Both express the ambivalent feelings inspired by any experience of the numinous, the feelings of attraction and awe so famously discussed by Rudolf Otto in his works. The latter type of "high femininity" represents a union of and transcendence of both. Fāṭimah is the *teacher* to the Prophet and the Imāms and is therefore superior to them in her spiritual status. Her teacher seems to be only God Himself, and in the passage from *Umm al-Kitāb*, she represents the Infinite Paradox of Divinity itself.

The expression "There is no God beside me, neither in divinity nor humanity, neither in the Heavens nor on earth, outside of me, who am Fāṭimah the Creator, it is I who created the spirit of the True Believers" is relevant in a number of regards here. Firstly, she transcends the bi-polar duality of humanity and divinity. Ibn 'Arabī, the great Andalusian mystic, always cast these two in a dialectical relationship with each other. One cannot subsist without the other, and both are bound together in a bond of

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love that cannot be severed. But Fāṭimah, in this passage, is being posited as what *lies beyond that duality*, of what lies beyond the dialectic of God and humanity. This is a very different type of feminine, the "esoteric feminine" that lies beyond all duality. If the Imām is the Face of God, as discussed above, then she is what lies behind the Face. She is what lies within, and so if the Imām represents the esoteric, she represents the esoteric of the esoteric. The Ismā'īli *hymns* also make reference to her as being the heart of Divinity:

> Brother believer, He [the Godhead] made Muhammad Mustafa from his holy forehead, and the Lord Ali was Himself manifested as Ali. He created the blessed Lady Fatimah from His holy breast, and the light of His two eyes were the blessed Imams Hasan and Husayn, who bring comfort to the heart.[36]

The breast, of course, represents the heart of something, and the fact that she is said to be created from the holy breast of 'Alī symbolizes that she is like the Heart of God Himself. In another *ginan*,[37] she is compared to Shakhti Herself, as an ultimate goddess figure. This is not surprising. The way that the Ismā'īlī hyms use the Hindu archetypes makes it natural that Fāṭimah, created from the heart of Divinity, who at a far earlier stage was described as being a goddess of whom there is "no other in humanity nor in divinity", would be identified with the Hindu Shakti. Shakti, of course, does not represent "passive femininity," but her name itself means force or power. On the one hand she represents motherhood, as expressed in the following supplication of Ramakrishna:

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[36] Shackle and Moir *Ismaili Hymns* 109.
[37] Shackle and Moir 200.

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I call to God as my Mother. Let Mother do whatever She likes. I shall know Her if it is Her will; but I shall be happy to remain ignorant if She wills ottherwise. The young child wants only his mother…All he knows is "I have a mother; why should I worry?" My attitude, too, is that of a child…I have taken refuge at Thy feet. I have sought protection in Thee. O Mother, I pray only that I may have pure love of Thy Lotus feet, love that seeks nor eturn. O Mother, I throw myself on Thy mercy; I take shelter at Thy hallowed Feet…Be gracious and grant that I may have pure love for Thee, a love unsmitten by desire, untainted by any selfish ends – a loved craved by the devotee for the sake of love alone.[38]

But as Radha, she is given enormous power. As beloved, she holds not just beauty, but creative and transformative power that is definitively *jalālī* in nature. This is the power that Ibn 'Arabī discusses in the final part of his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. We see Krishna praises her as Radha by saying:

I bring about creation through Her, I create Brahma and the other Devas through Her, the cosmos comes into being through Her, the world is released thruogh Her, the world would be nothing without Her…She is what burns in fire, She is the radiance of the sun, the light of the moon, the coolness in water, the power which makes grain grow…She is the power of devotional love…She is the one who continually devotes Herself to me in Bhakti…She is the power which allows the ocean of the world of appearances to be traversed, She is the Holy Wisdom of Those who are (the Holy Ones), She is presnence of mind, *She is the art of interpreting Sacred Scripture,* She is the power of giving in those whog ive, she is the love of noble women to their spouses.[39]

[38] Qtd. in Schiplfinger 321.
[39] Qtd. in Schipflinger 325-326

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Note the similarities between this and the very short passage from *Umm al-Kitab*, and Corbin's commentary on it. Fāṭimah is the mother of Divinity, of *lāhūt,* of Brahma. Ja'far ibn Manṣūr describes her as the one who creates and lays the foundation of *all* things. She is the one who not only gives birth to Jesus when she was Mary, but initiates him. She teaches 'Alī, the Face of God, all that has happened and all that will happen in the world. Through her, the Prophet, Ali, and all the heavens and the Earth come into existence. Fāṭimah, in her own right as a goddess within mystical Shī'ism, represents both receptivity and power. She *is* wife and mother, but she is also a power of creation and glory. She is both *jalālī* and *jamālī*, but she *is* also that which transcends the dualities inherent in the universe. She therefore encompasses everything within this mystical schema, and lies beyond it at all.

For this reason, the Imāms taught that it was impossible to ever have any true knowledge of her, and that the universe had been "weaned" from having any knowledge of her. She is not just Parvati, but she is Radha, and she is beyond both. If, as so many semiologists have argued, language is based on a set of differential signs, then she is always going to resist symbolization. This is why she is fundamentally a *paradox* in mystical Shī'ism: she manifests the unmanifestable, she manifests the great contradiction that Ḥamīd ad-Dīn al-Kirmanī posited for God, saying that "He does not exist, and He does not not-exist."

## Conclusions

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Fāṭimāh represents a powerful figure within the Shī'ite mystical tradition, far more then just the daughter of the Prophet, and the oppressed figure who had her inheritance stolen and the caliphate of her husband robbed. Rather, she is seen as being a manifestation of Divinity to those beings who manifest Divinity itself, the Imāms. They learn from her, they are taught by her, and they hold fast to her. Her status is even higher in the esoteric Ismā'īlī tradition. There she is described as being the initiator of the Prophets, as being the glass in which all the Imāms are contained, as being the heart of Divinity, and as being the Supreme Feminine Principle, Shakti, herself. In all of this we see a very different Fāṭimah from the one normally presented in the historical literature.

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